Prayer
what it is and what it does

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Prayer

O Thou Source of Holiness, Health and Beauty! Open our eyes to the glory and the wonder of a life touched with mystic experience and filled with spiritual opportunity. Renouncing all faithless fears and vain regrets, may we live in the glad freedom of Thy children and do the work of the day in cheerfulness and hope. Whether Thou leadest us to joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain, success or failure, grant us to learn the secret of Thy peace and to do Thy will.

Amen

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by

The Rev. Samuel McComb, D.D.

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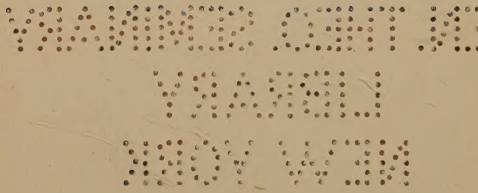

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Prayer

Prayer

WE live to-day in a world in which the signs of a returning spiritual springtide are all about us. Within and without the confines of organized Christianity the interests of the spiritual life are coming to their own. Our reigning philosophies are idealistic. Religion demands to be applied more and more to life, to the enlargement and the ennoblement of man. In this reaction against the deadening materialism of the past generation the problem of prayer is coming to the front, and once more challenges the powers of faith and thought. In England the Estab-

lished Church is calling for a revised prayer-book which will represent the esthetic and sociological aspirations as well as the newer religious insights of the age. Throughout English-speaking Christendom, in churches of the liturgical type, there are gatherings for informal prayer, as a supplement to the regular services, and among church-going people there is a demand for books of prayers which may help those to whom the art of self-expression does not come easily. But still more striking and still more significant is the fact that thousands who are out of sympathy with the churches are feeling the influence of the revived belief in prayer.

¶ We are witnessing, for example, the rise of mystical and therapeutic cults in which prayer plays a prominent rôle. The mystical ele-

ment in religion is taking revenge for past neglect by absorbing the minds of ever-increasing multitudes. We see signs of this return to the deepest things of the religious life, in the rise of such a movement as "The Fellowship in Silence and Meditation," which in unobtrusive ways is breaking down ecclesiastical barriers and softening theological animosities. In connection with this movement groups meet at stated times for silent prayer or meditation, or both, bound together only by their common belief in a spiritual world and in the possibility of access to it. And after the half-hour's communion without a word spoken they go their several ways. Not less notable is the fact that there are thousands who, though unable, through some agnostic bias, to pray, yet sympathize with the re-

mark of the skeptical physician in Miss Silberrad's *Curayl:* "Prayer does make a difference. If I knew how, I mean if I believed—oh, hang it! I'd give my right hand for a little more faith and a little less knowledge."

¶ Our age is nothing if not biological. Every existing institution and practice must be viewed from the standpoint of life and its preservation. We cannot be said to understand the meaning or the value of any human propensity until we know its relation to man's claim on life. People are beginning to see that if prayer has survived, while many other primitive religious practices have perished, there must be some reason for this survival. It is obvious that if prayer had not satisfied a vital need more or less successfully it would long since have disappeared. The question to-day is

not "Does prayer correspond to any reality?" It is rather this: "How are we to so understand and practise prayer that the reality which it implies may be brought to bear most effectively upon our lives?" Whether we pray or no, it is a great thing to understand that never had men more rational grounds to pray than at the present time.

¶ Let us start by defining what we mean by prayer before we raise the question of its nature and validity. What, then, is prayer? We must distinguish this spiritual act from others, such as meditation and ecstasy which merge into or emerge out of it, but which are not to be identified with it. Diderot's famous words testify to the psychological need that gives birth to prayer and yet do not constitute prayer in the strict sense of the word:

"Oh God, I know not that Thou art, but I will think as if Thou didst see into my soul, and I will act as if I were in Thy Presence."

Here we have a noble act of self-consecration, but nothing more. You cannot hold communion with a hypothetical Deity. Nor, again, can we give the name of prayer to such vague states as are described in these terms:

"I do not think literally of the will of God or of its guidance. I meditate on the work which I ought to accomplish best, and on the means of realizing it. In each of these periods of thought it seems to me that in some way I readjust myself to that which appears to be my duty. I confess to myself my faults and I form new resolutions to master them. Fre-

quently at such moments I begin to think of my friends. I make an inward effort to see their good sides, and, if they have any faults, to forget them."[1]

¶ The characteristic note of prayer is that it presupposes a spiritual Other with whom we would hold communion. The influx of energy, the various feelings of peace, poise, invigoration, esthetic satisfaction, and contemplative enjoyment are often accompaniments of various mental acts and states, and are therefore not peculiar to prayer. What is peculiar is that in the act of prayer we turn ourselves to Another whose fellowship we would enjoy, whose help we would seek, or whose forgiveness we would ask. Prayer is thus the expression of a definite mental attitude in which we

[1] Quoted in Albert Leo's *Étude Psychologique sur la Prière*, p. 4. From an unpublished manuscript.

seek to pass beyond ourselves, to complete ourselves in another. Hence, prayer springs out of a profound psychological necessity. We pray because we *must*. Our personality has no meaning save in relation to other personalities, and above all to the Divine Personality, who is the secret of all life and growth. Hence we must get rid of the popular conception that prayer is a rigid mechanical process whereby a man goes to God and asks for a definite, concrete boon, generally of a material character. Is the gift bestowed? The prayer is answered. Is the gift withheld? The prayer passes unheard. Such a notion is a mere survival of primitive superstition. It is too crude and superficial to be true. Rather are we to find in prayer, as Dr. Illingworth remarks, "the affirmation of our social

nature and its only adequate end in unison with the absolute and permanent Source of all society. Its human analogue is not petition, but intercourse with a friend. Primarily we desire such intercourse as an end in itself, simply because our friend is our friend, and the fact of intercourse with him manifests and satisfies our friendship."[1]

¶ Prayer is thus not a monologue, but a dialogue, a conference, a communion. Hence, with the idea of prayer the idea of God is intimately bound up. What kind of a God is He to whom we would pray? Has He personal attributes? and, if so, what are these attributes? Or is He an impersonal Energy, an infinite reservoir of forces? On the basis of the former doctrine we can have prayer; on the basis of the latter we

[1] *The Christian Character*, pp. 125, 126.

may have a prayer-like attitude, and even some of the benefits of prayer, but hardly prayer itself. The pantheist can meditate and by his meditation can feel himself at one with the infinite Life of the universe. But only he who believes that there is a higher Presence who sees him through and through and can make response to his approach may be said really to pray. In the praying consciousness God must be conceived as personal, though in thus personalizing Him reflection may testify that we are making use of symbolic imagery. "Prayer," says Sabatier, "is the movement of the soul, putting itself into personal relation and contact with the mysterious Power whose presence it feels even before it is able to give it a name."[1] The nearer we

[1] *Outline of the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 28.

are to nature and simplicity the more clearly do we discern the reality of this "the Eternal not-ourselves" which makes for life and peace and all-good. Victor Hugo makes one of his characters ask, "Do you believe in God?" The answer given is, "Yes —no—sometimes." Whether we will or no, there are critical moments when, as we say, we rise above ourselves and touch the Infinite and the Divine and we are compelled to pray. It is the possession of this power which lifts man out of the animal category and makes him a citizen of the universal Kingdom of God. However wonderful may be the powers of the lower animals, there is one thing they cannot do—they cannot aspire after fellowship with the Infinite. The hart may pant for the water-brooks, but it is the soul that thirsts for God.

¶ Now, prayer is either practical, capable of doing things, or it is absurd and even ridiculous. Either it means unspeakable blessedness, enlargement of life, release of psychic energies hitherto bound fast, a real increase in spiritual power, or it is vanity and emptiness. Prayer is thus seen, as a matter of cold scientific fact, to have an important bearing upon character. Like morality or art, it is a factor in the formation of human personality. Other things being equal, the praying man has a unity of life and a corresponding forcefulness of character to which the non-praying man can lay no claim. As William James remarks: "In few of us are functions not tied up by the exercise of other functions. Relatively few medical and scientific men can pray. Few can carry on any living com-

merce with 'God.' Now many of us are well aware of how much freer and abler our lives would be were such important forms of energizing not sealed up by the critical atmosphere in which we have been reared. There are in every one potential forms of activity that actually are shunted out from use. Part of the imperfect vitality under which we labor can thus be easily explained."[1] It is a matter of history that men who have really prayed have also been men of unusual force of character. We cannot conceive that Martin Luther or General Gordon or Mr. Gladstone would have been the men they were, or would have left the mark they did, had they not been men of prayer. The Master of prayer seems to have been most impressed by its quality as an energiz-

[1] *Energies of Men*, p. 34.

ing principle in human nature. There has come down to us a great mystical saying of His which bears every mark of authenticity: "This kind goeth not out save by prayer."[1] In other words, something happens which would not happen but for prayer. Here, then, is the unanswerable argument for prayer. It is a cause which operates in the world of facts. It works like other substantial realities of experience. In the ethical region it has power to transform character, making bad persons good and turning the conventionally good into heroes and heroines of the spirit. There is not a mission hall in the slums of any of our great cities which cannot boast of the moral achievements of prayer, some of them dramatic and spectacular enough. Under the influence of

[1] Matt. xvii, 21.

mystic contact with the Unseen, sinful habits fall away from men and women and their lives are lifted to new planes of experience, where even the face of nature seems transfigured as with an ideal glory. Unsuspected spiritual possibilities leap into activity, and the subjects of this wonderful experience speak of themselves henceforth as "twice-born men." In psychological language, the social relation implied in prayer is realized and a larger and better self than the self hitherto known has become a fact.

¶ Mr. Harold Begbie, in his well-known book, *Twice-born Men*, tells the story of a habitual criminal who passed through such a spiritual crisis. This man began his career of crime by committing a burglary when he was thirteen years of age. Not only was he a criminal, but he rejoiced in his

anti-social deeds. Most of his time was spent in prison. During one of these periods of enforced seclusion the thought occurred to him that there was something wrong with his life and that prayer might set it right. For the first time in his life he prayed. It was a very unconventional prayer. He besought Heaven to send him a good woman who would marry him, and give him a chance to live a respectable life. On getting out of prison he continued to pray, until at last the crisis came at a religious meeting, when the desire to steal passed from him never to return. He has shown, by an honored and useful life since then, that the change was absolute and complete.

¶ Now, while many religious thinkers magnify the power of prayer in the purely ethical or spiritual region, they

fight shy of recognizing its validity in any other sphere of human experience. One of the living issues in religion at the present time is the relation of prayer to disease. "There has probably never been a time," says a recent writer, "when this use of prayer has aroused more public discussion than at the present day, because the world has never before passed through an era like that of the last fifty years, in which all dependence on mental and spiritual means in the cure of disorders was so rigorously excluded. Up to that time those who used prayer used it as a matter of course and with little discrimination, in connection with other means. Now the whole matter is under strenuous discussion, a discussion which will probably result in more adequate distinctions than have

as yet obtained concerning the employment of prayer in this field."[1]

¶ It is a scandal to modern theology that it has never seriously grappled with this problem. The whole region covered by the influence of spiritual forces on diseased or disordered states has become the almost exclusive preserve of crack-brained enthusiasts, of charlatans conscious and unconscious, with the result that thoughtful and self-respecting men dismiss the phenomena as the product of "suggestion," or as due to the power of imagination, and therefore as having no connection with spiritual religion. And yet the facts remain—that Christ appears in the double capacity of Teacher and Healer; that His Disciples followed His example, and went forth casting out demons

[1] A. L. Strong, *The Psychology of Prayer*, p. 61.

as well as preaching the Gospel; that for three centuries the Church gained her most signal victories, as Dr. Harnack has abundantly and brilliantly shown in his *Expansion of Christianity*, because of her startling achievements in the healing of the psycho-physical miseries of the ancient world; and, finally, that among the great men of the Christian religion the very greatest did not hesitate to find in prayer a weapon strong against disease, as against sin and vice. A belief shared by such men as St. Paul, Augustine, Origen, Francis of Assisi, Luther, Swedenborg, and John Wesley, cannot be dismissed as an unhappy accretion to Christianity, which must be apologized for as the product of an overstrained enthusiasm. We really ought to ask, What is the irrationality in this use

of prayer? If the aim of prayer be, as has been said, the construction of a larger, stronger, and more harmonious self, and if there are states of mind, habits, partly mental and partly physical, which make for weakness, dissociation, and nervousness, must not prayer, in achieving its aim, abolish these?

¶ There are forms of disorder which are not primarily affections of the body, but of the soul—miseries and disorders of mind, invasions of personality, stresses so poignant that only the power of the spiritual world, mediated through prayer, avails to quell them and to restore inner harmony and integrity. A cogent illustration is that of alcoholism. The most recent investigations assert that we have here primarily not a physical disease, but a psychical disorder, a

serious affection of the self, which paralyzes the energies that make possible the spiritual life. In the alcoholic we have a problem that is fundamentally psychological and ethical and only in a very minor degree physical. What the alcoholic needs is a different self, and the establishment of this different self is the function of prayer. The rise of the "new" psychology, with its emphasis on the importance of the subconscious, has thrown light on the mechanism by which prayer, conceived as a mental event, operates. In prayer we surrender ourselves to One holier and mightier than we. This self-surrender means the giving up of conscious, concentrated effort, and the falling back upon the energies of the subconscious factor in our mental life. This involves a change of mental

attitude. Now let the new attitude be motived by the thought that He to whom we resign ourselves is the embodiment of all our ideal hopes and aspirations; and with this self-surrender there comes a sense of quiet, of rest, of satisfaction, the feeling which the mystics describe as "the settling of the soul in peace." "When," says Brother Laurence, "God finds a soul permeated with a living faith, He pours into it His graces and His favors plenteously. Into the soul they flow like a torrent, which after being forcibly stopped against its ordinary course, when it has found a passage, spreads with impetuosity its pent-up flood."[1] In other words, unity takes the place of anarchy; the dissociated states of consciousness are harmonized and the

[1] *Practice of the Presence of God*, p. 20.

misery and wretchedness of a divided self gradually vanish away.

¶ The question formerly so much debated, "Are the effects of prayer merely subjective, or are they objective as well?" has assumed a new form. The truth is that the subjective and the objective cannot be separated, as though the material world was a closed circle, whereas, as all the higher thought of our time assures us, it is penetrated through and through by spirit; and more especially is this true of the matter which in our physical organism lies closest to human consciousness. Prayer creates the new self, but the new self does not live in a vacuum. It in turn creates the new environment both as regards the physical organism and the world around; and thus it comes about that objective

changes take place which would not have taken place but for the intervention of the spiritual state induced by prayer.

¶ Now if prayer can bring these great things to pass, why do so many persons complain that they have prayed for years and yet have derived no appreciable good? Here we come face to face with the problem of unanswered prayer. A complete solution of this problem is not possible, for all the facts in the problem are not known to us. But at least we can see this—that there is a right and a wrong way of praying; that prayer, like any other phenomenon, is under certain laws, without obedience to which no result follows, nothing is done; that it is true that all men pray at some time or other of their lives, for even the most frivolous natures in the

presence of some heart-shaking disaster are stripped bare of all pretense and catch a glimpse of reality. Yet it is also true that prayer is an art, and like every art demands knowledge of its methods—if one may say so, of its technique. There is first of all the *law of limitation.* Prayer is not an omnipotent energy overriding all other energies, a mere exercise of magic, whereby we gain our desires simply for the asking, without any regard to the nature of the desire or the method of the request. For example, modern science has graven deep on our minds the fact that the world is governed by general laws which never break faith with us. "I bless God," said Rousseau, "but I pray not. Why should I ask of Him that He would change for me the course of things, do miracles in my

favor? I, who ought to love above all the order established by His wisdom and maintained by His providence, shall I wish that order to be dissolved on my account? As little do I ask of Him the power to do well. Why ask what He has already given?"

¶ Now it is true that God does govern the physical universe by general laws. The regularities of heaven and earth are but the modes of the Divine action. Harshly as these laws bear at times upon the individual, without them a universe would be inconceivable. We should have a chaos, not a cosmos, and the perfecting of the human spirit would be a hopeless task. Therefore true prayer does not aim at setting aside any of the universal rules that govern the solid framework of nature. Its function here is to calm the mind, uplift the

heart, and impart the grace of endurance. Why should gravitation cease to operate because we pray? Why should the sun shine or the rain fall in obedience to our behest? But even within the sphere of the personal life there are limitations to the power of prayer. Providence puts burdens upon us which prayer is powerless to remove. There are handicaps in the race of life, and we must bear them to the end. Must we then say that here prayer is valueless? On the contrary, it turns its limitations into a glory, for it gives power to the soul to triumph over its weakness and to find through its very trials a larger vision and a grander world.

¶ Then there is a law of limitation in regard to the objects prayed for. "It would be," says Professor Herrmann, "a shameful misuse of prayer if

trifles which have really no significance for our inner life were to be made the topics of our prayers. A prayer offered in such a trafficking fashion would either be empty talk or would keep us entangled by matters which ought to trouble no serious man."[1] The end and aim of prayer is the development within us of a better self, and anything which does not bear upon this development has no place in genuine prayer. Rousseau is right when he limits the working of prayer by the laws of the physical world. He is wrong when in the moral and spiritual sphere he throws man back upon the exercise of his natural powers; for we know that through fellowship with God in prayer, there comes reinforcement to our moral energies and a steadier hold upon

[1] *Communion of the Christian with God*, p. 249.

moral realities. Then, again, the same type of prayer is not suited to all our moods. When in the full tide of physical and mental health our prayers will naturally come under the psychical law of attention. The Master of the art of prayer lays down in metaphorical language this great principle: "Thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet and shut the door and pray to thy Father in secret." Translated into psychological terms this means, "Keep out the multitudinous impressions that tend to overwhelm the mind. Concentrate your thought on the matter in hand. Be conscious only of this Other with whom you would speak." There is nothing arbitrary about this law. It holds good in all departments of human activity. The business man must not allow himself to be sub-

merged by the rush of endless affairs. He must select certain lines of activity and give himself to these. The student must arrest certain thoughts that float along the stream of consciousness, hold them up, as it were, to his mental eye, regard them in their various relations, that out of them he may build a coherent system of ideas. So it is in the spiritual realm.

¶ But there are other moods when attention must be relaxed, and we must pray in a different fashion. There are hours of sickness, or depression, or discouragement, when the wheels of being run slowly and life seems gray and somber. Then it is not mental activity, but relief from activity, that is needed; yet not mere cessation of consciously directed thought, but rather the quiet, restful

realization of a Presence which brings peace, rest, and a sense of well-being. Here prayer takes the form, not of a petition for some external gift, but of resting and lying still in the thought of a Divine companionship and a friendly universe.

¶ Thus in prayer do we escape from our own sick, weary, and contracted self to a self radiant in health and strength and beauty. Or, again, there is the mood which falls upon us all at rare moments when we look up at night into the star-strewn sky and are overwhelmed by the immensity of the universe, or when we walk along some lonely road in midnight darkness, surrounded by dim shapes which conceal we know not what, and there falls upon us a sense of the mysteries of life and death. At such moments to know that we can speak to Him

who is Lord of All must of itself bring a relief, a feeling that though in one sense we are alone, yet in another and deeper sense we are never alone. In prayer God ceases to be an abstraction or a pale intellectual phantom, and becomes the Great Companion, the true Friend of the soul.

¶ Prayer is subject to *the law of sincerity*. In the few priceless words of Christ which have come down to us on this subject we note the grave warning which He gives against the prayer of the hypocrite and the prayer of the superstitious. In the one case prayer is an ostentatious display, and in the other a magical incantation. The insincere man tries to deceive himself or others. Like one of the Bourbon kings of France, of whom it is said that he besought the Almighty to allow him to commit one more sin,

the victim of superstition is absorbed in some earthly desire, and seeks to bend the will of the Supreme to his own behest. But, as we have seen, the very essence of prayer lies in direct, open-faced intercourse with God, as with a Friend. And just as human friendship is impossible, apart from reality and veracity, so, too, for inner fellowship with God sincerity is the prime prerequisite. This sincerity involves spiritual discipline. We must get face to face with our real, as distinguished from our apparent, selves. We must know the weaknesses into which we have fallen, the wrong things we have desired, the cowardice of which we have been guilty, the harsh words we have uttered, and the unloving deeds we have done against the living and the dead. So, too, with the other and—we must believe

—the deeper side of our lives. We must get to know not merely our baser, but our better self, its discontent with the past, its longing to be free, its yearning to be at one with itself and with God. Thus prayer may be described as the great school of sincerity.

¶ Still further, in order to pray so as to win the blessing which prayer brings, we must have a belief in the reality of God. To win this sense of the Divine Reality comes easy to some. It is a difficult task for others. What most of us need is to arouse our imagination so that the vague religious ideas which we identify with our creed may be transformed into facts of transcendent importance. We will do well if we set aside a few minutes every day for quiet reflection, for brooding over the words of psalmist

and poet and prophet, until we feel something of their certainty of the eternal world. Then we *must* pray, and the more we pray the easier the act becomes, until at last prayer becomes our refuge in every sorrow, our strength amid the disillusionments of the world, an open door into a grander universe, where at last we find the secret of blessedness.

¶ Finally, our prayers should be positive in character. It is true that we must speak of our sins, but, as Dante says, "One glance, and then pass on." Do not dwell on your favorite vices, for by thus dwelling on them you direct your attention to them and so help to fasten them more closely about you. Let the drunkard turn from thoughts of his temptation, even though these thoughts should take the

form of petitions to be delivered from his vice, and let him pray for some noble ambition, for a larger love for his fellow-men, for powers of mastery and self-control, for devotion to some ideal that reaches beyond the passing moment; and gradually the obsessive curse will loosen its grip, the hated desire will die away, and the soul will enter into peace.

¶ It may then be safely said that he who wilfully refuses to pray is narrowing his world and is deliberately cutting himself off from the highest sources of inspiration and happiness. The habit of prayer, like all habits worth cultivating, is difficult. We make the effort perhaps a few times, find it too hard, and then give it up in despair or resign ourselves to that most dreary of all employments, the mere saying of prayers. The source

of our failure, it is obvious, lies in the weakness of our wills, for, as has been said, to pray aright we must control our attention. But to control the attention means to exercise strenuously the will. The mind has a tendency to go its own way irrespective of the will. Suggestions and impressions drive it this way and that, and to bring it under control and compel it to concern itself with the interests and objects we have most at heart requires a seriousness and strenuousness all too rare. Yet, like every other habit, the habit of prayer can be formed if we set ourselves to the task. To put ourselves consciously in the Divine Presence, were it only for a few moments every day, would be an exercise fraught with untold blessings for ourselves. For thereby there would slowly grow within us reserves

of spiritual strength and ethical knowledge which would stand us in good stead when the searching hour of trial comes.

Prayer

¶ "*Science cannot forbid us to pray. What science teaches only serves to enrich our knowledge of the inner processes of prayer. It is easier for us to conceive the supernatural power of God, if the thought of nature in its inescapable truth is present with us. . . . God has given to real prayer the power to shape the future for men and the world.*"—W. HERRMANN.

¶ "*Prayer is the very sword of the saints, but prayer grows tarnished save the brain be healthful, nor can the brain be long healthful in an unhealthy body.*"—FRANCIS THOMPSON.

¶ "*He who rises from his prayer a better man, his prayer is answered.*"—GEORGE MEREDITH.

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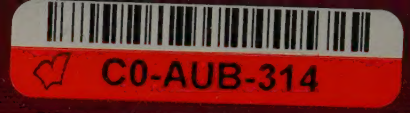
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